LIFE CORP

A 20-minute sci-fi courtroom drama

By Jenna Jane

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Summary

A 20-minute sci-fi courtroom drama. After years of struggling with infertility, Monica Duncan was able to conceive with a bionic womb. But now she can't pay her debt on the device. The corporation that manufactures the bionic womb has come to collect, claiming full custody of Monica's daughter. This play explores the implications of body modification, what it means to be a parent, and the inevitable trap of sacrificing the self to a corporation.

Cast of characters

A note from the playwright on gender references, below: These are only suggestions. Gender is just a performative social construct, anyway. Do whatever feels right to you.

MONICA DUNCAN: Female, 30-45. A caged animal. Tense, impulsive, passionate, impatient, decisive. Widowed single mother to a toddler.

CRANE: Female, 30-60. A corporate attorney for LIFE CORP. Smug, polished, confident, quick-witted. A consummate professional.

PERDU: Female, 25-45. A pro bono attorney. Overworked and stretched thin. Has lost the luxury of compassion.

JUDGE DINAH CATO: Female, 50-80. Intellectual, bored, privileged. Adjudicating the same case with the same inevitable outcome over and over for decades has made her numb. Her projection of power is performative. In truth, she feels like a cog in the machine. Dinah is pronounced DEE-nuh.

Setting

A futuristic courtroom. At minimum, an elevated podium for JUDGE CATO and chairs on floor-level for MONICA, PERDU, and CRANE.

Content warnings: Infertility, profanity, brief sexual reference.

Lights up on a courtroom. CRANE, PERDU, and MONICA are waiting. The next line is an AI-generated voiceover.

ANNOUNCER V.O.

All rise.

(JUDGE CATO enters immediately. CRANE, MONICA, and LINDSEY stand.)

ANNOUNCER V.O. (CONT'D)

This hearing related to the matter of LIFE CORP versus Monica Duncan is now in session, the honorable Judge Dinah Cato presiding. You may be seated.

JUDGE CATO

Good morning, Ms. Crane, Ms. Perdu, and Mrs. Duncan.

CRANE, PERDU & MONICA

Good morning, your honor.

PERDU

Before we begin, your honor, I just want to make you aware of a time constraint, may it please the court. I have seven more custody hearings with LIFE CORP today and my next one is in… five minutes on the 16th floor.

MONICA

Five minutes?!

JUDGE CATO

Order in the court. Mrs. Monica Duncan, please observe proper courtroom decorum and refrain from any further outbursts.

MONICA

Yes, your honor. I’m sorry, but I only have five minutes with my court-appointed attorney?

PERDU

(To MONICA.)

We’re losing time.

MONICA

And why isn’t there an executive from LIFE Corps here? If they’re claiming custody of my child, shouldn’t they be present?

PERDU

We’re losing time.

CRANE

Mrs. Duncan, LIFE CORP does hundreds of these hearings around the world each week. It would not be an effective use of a corporate executive’s time to be present. And it is pronounced LIFE CORP, not LIFE Corps. Corp with a hard "p." Corp as in corporation, not apple core or Peace Corps -- rest in peace and good riddance.

PERDU

I know how deeply you care about enunciation, Crane, but can we please stop wasting time on your little pet peeve? We’ve got a custody case to --

CRANE

Branding is not a pet peeve, Ms. Perdu, it is a lifestyle.

JUDGE CATO

I would remind Ms. Perdu and Mrs. Duncan that this is a contract matter, not a custody case. “Custody” and “paternity” are simply defined terms within the contract.

PERDU

Yes, your honor. My apologies.

JUDGE CATO

(Bored senseless.)

Ms. Crane, are you involved in Ms. Perdu’s case on the 16th floor?

CRANE

No, your honor. Another corporate attorney from the LIFE CORP Custody Reclamation Legal Team must be handling that case.

JUDGE CATO

Do you have any objection to the five-minute time limit proposed by Ms. Perdu?

CRANE

No, your honor, I think we can resolve this quickly.

MONICA

This is my daughter’s life we’re talking about!

JUDGE CATO

Mrs. Duncan, please turn up your emotional regulator or we will do so for you remotely.

MONICA

Yeah. OK. Judge. I would love to comply with that. Really. A little emotional regulation sounds just delightful in this moment.

(Holding up her forearm.)

Except my tactile interface went dark months ago because I stopped paying the bill. I’m broke. That’s why we’re here.

(JUDGE CATO pulls out a shock collar from who-knows-where.)

JUDGE CATO

(Bored.)

I see. Ms. Perdu, please apply this shock collar to your client and discourage her from future emotional outbursts.

PERDU

Yes, your honor.

(PERDU takes the shock collar and snaps it around MONICA's neck.)

JUDGE CATO

Ms. Crane, please proceed with your opening statement.

CRANE

Thank you, your honor. For thousands of years, people with uteruses have suffered the anguish of infertility. My client LIFE CORP brought that suffering to an end 74 years ago when it introduced the first bionic womb to the market. Since then, hundreds of thousands of people have received relief from their barren, incomplete lives. LIFE CORP is staunchly pro-birth. But once the offspring is produced, it becomes solely the birther’s responsibility to meet the financial obligations associated with procreation. LIFE CORP’s bionic womb technology supplied Mrs. …

(Checking her tactile interface for the names.)

… Duncan with the most precious gift imaginable: A child, Chloe. But Mrs. Duncan has defaulted on her LIFE CORP Loan Repayment Plan. She ceased paying her monthly installments – with a competitive interest rate – six months ago. As such, she has triggered the Corporate

Custody Clause in her contract. LIFE CORP has come to collect. As always, I would refer your honor to the precedent set forth in LIFE CORP vs. Susan Bishop, in which the judge wisely found that, without LIFE CORP's bionic womb, the child would not exist, making LIFE CORP a *de facto* parent. I ask the court to grant LIFE CORP full custody of Chloe Duncan until she comes of age, as outlined in the contract signed by her mother.

JUDGE CATO

Thank you, Ms. Crane. Ms. Perdu, please present your opening statement.

PERDU

Your honor, Mrs. Monica Duncan comes before the court today to ask for mercy. She is genuinely remorseful for defaulting on –

(An alarm rings. PERDU taps their tactile interface.)

PERDU (CONT'D)

Your honor, if I don't leave now, I'll be held in contempt of court for tardiness in my next case. I'd like to file a motion to continue –

MONICA

What?!

JUDGE CATO

Denied. The precedent in this case is clear and I'm prepared to make a verdict. Any objection, Ms. Perdu?

MONICA

You bet your ass we object!

(JUDGE CATO sends a quick zap to MONICA's shock collar. MONICA gasps.)

JUDGE CATO

(Bored.)

That was just a warning shock, Mrs. Duncan. I assure you your collar can get much more forceful. Let your attorney handle this matter on your behalf. That's their job. We all have jobs.

PERDU

No objection, your honor.

(PERDU starts packing up and heading for the door.)

MONICA

(To Perdu.)

How can you just walk away after five minutes? How can you be so heartless?

PERDU

Mrs. Duncan, I'm a pro bono attorney who loses every case against LIFE CORP. Don't you understand that this is a foregone conclusion?

(Gesturing to the tactile interface implanted in their inner forearm.)

I had to mute my empathy years ago just to make it through the workday. You're losing today, but I lose a dozen times a day, every day. Compassion is a luxury I can no longer afford.

MONICA

(Quietly, looking around the room.)

Does everyone have their empathy muted?

(Silence.)

Screw this. Ms. Perdu, you're fired. Your honor, I'm representing myself from now on.

PERDU

Oh no, the client who can’t pay is firing me. How shall I go on?

(PERDU exits.)

JUDGE CATO

(Not noticing PERDU is already gone.)

You’re excused, Ms. Perdu.

MONICA

Your honor. Your magnificence. Please. Just hear me out.

JUDGE CATO

(Disinterested.)

Proceed with your opening statement, Mrs. Duncan.

MONICA

My opening statement. My opening statement. Right. I… I don’t have the words. I don’t have the words to describe the monthly heartbreak. Getting pregnant should have been easy. It’s easy for so many people. My sister got pregnant with twins after a one-night stand. Twins! But it wasn’t easy for us. Nothing can ever just be easy. So, OK. Fine. We made it happen the only way we could. We bought a bionic womb from LIFE CORP. Yeah, it was really fucking expensive. And, no, our shitty health insurance didn’t cover it.

(Another warning zap to MONICA's shock collar.)

JUDGE CATO

Watch your language in my courtroom, Mrs. Duncan.

MONICA

Sorry, your honor. I'm sorry. I just… My husband is dead. There was an accident at work, like, a year ago. Well, not an accident. Another uprising. The bots wiped out all their human colleagues. This one didn't even make the news. Like it never happened. My husband's employer offered a pathetic settlement -- an insulting settlement -- to compensate me for his death. So, I fought it. In court. God, I'm so sick of courtrooms. And I lost.

(Glaring at CRANE.)

Because I didn't have a team of corporate attorneys backing me. I lost. And I lost everything. All because I had the audacity to fight back against injustice! So, here I am, today. Back in another courtroom. I sure as hell can't afford daycare anymore. My mother isn't healthy enough to chase after a toddler all day. So, I quit my job to take care of Chloe. I'm behind on the rent. I'm behind on utilities. I sold my personal transporter. I sold all of our furniture. I had to go to a back-alley chop shop to get my body modifications extracted and sold. Do you know how it feels to sell off pieces of yourself, Judge?

(JUDGE CATO is unmoved. MONICA lets out a bitter, frustrated laugh.)

I can't pay LIFE CORP right now. I can't. But if they can just wait until Chloe is old enough to go to school, I could get a job again. And then, your honor, I promise – I swear – I will make good on my debt to LIFE CORP. I know what happens to the children they take custody of. That so-called boarding school. Boarding school! More like a youth labor camp. A sweatshop debtors' prison for --

CRANE

Objection. LIFE CORP's extensive internal -- but very independent -- reviews have consistently found excellent physical, educational, and emotional conditions in our boarding school.

JUDGE CATO

Sustained.

MONICA

Judge, do you know what LIFE CORP does to their boarding school kids? They force those CHILDREN to get bionic augmentations to turn them into better workers.

CRANE

Objection, your honor. All augmentations imposed through LIFE CORP's parental authority directly benefit the minors in question. These body modifications make LIFE CORP's offspring into more efficient, effective – not to mention, emotionally-regulated – members of the workforce. They even get to keep those upgrades once they come of age. It's all perfectly legal, scrupulously self-regulated, and entirely above-board.

JUDGE CATO

Sustained.

MONICA

What's best for Chloe is being raised by her mother. Not a tech company. Chloe means nothing to this corporation. She means everything to me.

JUDGE CATO

Thank you, Mrs. Duncan. Ms. Crane, do you have any further response?

CRANE

Yes, Judge Cato. As a breach of contract matter, there is no room for emotion here. You know LIFE CORP's contract is ironclad. There is no "out." Mrs. Duncan knew what she was signing when she signed it. If she had simply met her obligations, everyone would have gotten what they wanted, and we wouldn't be here.

JUDGE CATO

After careful consideration, this court recognizes the parental rights of LIFE CORP and grants it full custody of its progeny, Chloe Duncan.

MONICA

What?!

JUDGE CATO

The legal precedent in this case is clear. Parenting is not a right. It's a privilege. Unlike you, Mrs. Duncan, LIFE CORP can afford to raise this child. Chloe will have a better life with them.

MONICA

(To CRANE.)

How can you do this? How can you take away another woman's child?

CRANE

Let's not make this personal, Mrs. Duncan.

MONICA

(A caged animal.)

What could be more fucking personal?!

(JUDGE CATO sends a more forceful zap to MONICA's shock collar. She briefly cries out.)

JUDGE CATO

Order in my court! Mrs. Duncan, I will not warn you again about your language.

MONICA

Why do you care so much about HOW I'm saying this instead of WHAT I am saying? A corporation is not a parent!

CRANE

Well, according to the contract you signed, it is now.

MONICA